The South African labour movement

A fragmented and shifting terrain

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Introduction

In 2014, the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA), one of the most historically militant, largest and powerful unions in the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was expelled from the federation. With its exit COSATU membership dropped from 1.9 million workers to 1.6 million. This moment was both a symptom and a cause of the increasing fragmentation of the once unified and dominant labour movement in South Africa. For a brief time it was held out as a renewal of trade unions, and yet, a few years on, the labour movement remains weak. As many have written about, the changes to the federation from its halcyon days of struggle to the transition to post-apartheid South Africa have multiple explanations and trace out over the last twenty six years of democratic South Africa (Adler and Webster, 2000; Bramble and Barchiesi, 2003; Webster and von Holdt, 2005; Buhlungu, 2010; Bezuidenhout and Tshoaedi, 2017). Dynamics since the split continue to illustrate organizational and class compositional divisions within society. This paper outlines these changes.

Debate rages among activists and academics in South Africa over the current status of the labour movement – whether it is 'dead' or being reborn in new organizational forms and/or broader class movements. There is no question, the labour

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movement in South Africa has fragmented and is changing. Unions have lost political appeal for many, including many young workers, influence and power. They represent a declining population of wage workers in an economy hit by restructuring and retrenchments and as the so-called 'informal sector' has grown.

Of the nearly 23 million people in the labour force (out of a total of 38.4 million people between the ages of 15 and 64), 48.6% are in formal sector jobs, 13.2% in the informal sector, 3.6% in agriculture and 5.4% in private households. The latter two categories represent categories that are *de jure* (by law) 'formal' jobs in terms of legislative coverage, but de facto are often highly precarianized work subjected to forms of apartheid-era racial subjugation. The official unemployment rate now stands at 29%, not including discouraged work seekers, which are another 7% of the working age population (putting the 'expanded' unemployment rate at 36%) (StatsSA, 2019). Within the working population, conditions have stagnated or declined and wages have not increased in the two decades following 1994 (Barchiesi, 2011; Theron, 2005; Kenny and Webster, 1998; Gentle, 2015; Webster and Frances, 2019). Increasing unemployment and wider household precariousness extend the effects of changes to wage labour broadly to most South Africans (Fakier and Cock, 2009; Bezuidenhout and Fakier, 2006; Mosoetsa, 2011; Benya, 2015; Marais, 2020). Indeed, most households in South Africa rely on a diverse and shifting membership and source of contributions, including state grants, informal livelihoods and wage labour (Mosoetsa, 2011; Scully, 2016). In general in the post-apartheid period, in the poorest households, wages account for a relatively small proportion of overall income, although consequently when present, wages help to determine basic household stability (Finn, 2015). Thus, unions relate to a declining population of working people, while the relative importance of wages remains high in such circuits of relation (Kenny, 2018).

Conditions producing economic vulnerability indeed bind precarious jobs to commodification and declining access to public services (Naidoo, 2009; Barchiesi, 2011). A complex mix of social movements have pushed back against neoliberal onslaught in South Africa over the past two decades, including the labour movement, sometimes working together but often not (Naidoo and Veriava, 2005; Desai, 2002). Nevertheless, much of the resilience of working class movements in South Africa must be attributed to the clear sense in which "subjects-in-struggle" (Hall, 1985, p. 112) regenerate through the very reproduction of race-class relations in ways that continue to imbricate wage workers in these efforts. Despite growing precariousness, increasing 'wagelessness', and disconnection of ordinary people from union structures, working people have continued to articulate a collective political subjectivity of 'workers', or in the isiZulu collective noun form, *abasebenzi*

(Kenny, 2018). This historical and evolving political subjectivity remains emotively resonant in the face of sustained attacks against workers. This suggests that historically situated relations underpinning movements, in this case, the enduring power and meaning of collective worker identity to ordinary South African workers, itself offers a resource, even as global events like the financial crisis intertwine with local conditions to exacerbate challenges.

The 2008 global financial crisis affected the South African economy, although initially South Africa seemed to stay off the worst effects of the financial crisis. For instance, South Africa's banking sector had maintained better leverage than the big US and European banks, at 16% average leverage (debt to equity ratio) compared to from 35% to up to 50-60% for the big global investment banks (Padayachee, 2012, p. 7). South African banks had already taken measures to improve their capital ratios before the crisis and local regulation of the banking industry meant that due to restrictions of exchange control banks could not invest in the forms of "toxic asset floating" as in other contexts. They were also required to increase their capital ratios, which were raised when banks granting loans of greater than 80% of a property's value, which limited banks from loaning indiscriminately as elsewhere (Padayachee, 2012, p. 8). Still, credit risk ratios got worse after 2008, growth in credit fell, and local banks' earnings were affected (Padayachee, 2012, pp. 9-10).

More directly, by early 2009, the country went into recession for the first time since the late 1980s, and large job losses of nearly a million jobs in 2009, particularly in manufacturing, hit the country (Padayachee, 2012)[1].

South African macroeconomic policy revolved around its 'home spun structural adjustment program', the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) framework, which forced balances within IMF norms. South Africa maintained increases in rates of economic growth (although not as high as expected), kept inflation within its target of 3-6% (for the most part), and budget deficit was controlled before 2007 (Padayachee, 2012, p. 3). By the end of 2008 and beginning of 2009, South Africa's growth rate fell to 1.8% and then the economy fell into recession. By the second quarter of 2009 it was at -3.2% (Padayachee, 2012, p. 3). Manufacturing output declined by 6.8%; mining production declined by 12.8% between first quarter 2008 and the same period 2009. Inflation increased, and the CPIX reached an average of 9.9% in 2008 (Padayachee, 2012, p. 4).

South Africa is relatively open to the global economy, and has been, of course, historically. The global financial crisis weakened the value of the currency. After

1. Available at https://www.fin24.com/Economy/Job-losses-to-exceed-a-million-20091029, accessed 15/2/2020.

2009 GDP recovered partly related to an upturn in the commodity cycle, eventually reaching growth of 3% again, which then ended in 2014 with mineral prices, seeing a decline again in growth rates in South Africa to less than 2% thereafter (Kantor, 2018). Padayachee (2012) argues that the main effect of the financial crisis on South and Southern Africa was the slowdown in foreign financial inflows coupled with the region's reliance on commodity based export growth.

The South African state's response to the financial crisis was initially to keep up spending on physical investment, including roads, power stations, housing, and in 2010, its hosting of the FIFA World Cup. This coincided with the shift in ANC factions in power from the explicit neoliberals of the Thabo Mbeki era to the win by Jacob Zuma (backed by the Communist Party and COSATU) meant to be a left shift in late 2007 as head of the ANC, with Zuma taking over as state president in late 2008. The local political dynamics intertwining with the wake of global financial crisis makes the national terrain complex. Zuma ended up representing a new kleptocratic elite, which used state owned enterprises for personal gain, siphoning billions of Rands out of state coffers. At the same time, the finance policy continued along similar lines as can been seen in the National Developmenet Plan (NDP), launched at the ANC 2012 Policy Conference. Indeed, Segatti and Pons-Vignon (2013, p. 538) argue that there has been a "neoliberal deepening" in the transition from Mbeki to Zuma and in the post-2008 financial crisis period.

The neoliberalism of ANC policy has been charted under Mbeki (see Segatti and Pons-Vignon, 2013 for summary; and see Freund, 2013). By 1993, the ANC had decisively chosen an export-oriented growth strategy and opened up to privatization (Segatti and Pons-Vignon, 2013, p. 544). This policy orientation was consolidated under GEAR. After 2008, the ANC adopted two economic policy frameworks, the New Growth Path and the National Development Plan. The dominance of the National Treasury continued in both these documents. The New Growth Path, for instance, did not offer any further controls over financial capital (and capital flight) that had defined a structural shift in South Africa's economy in the post-apartheid period (Ashman, Fine and Newman, 2011; Fine, 2012; Segatti and Pons-Vignon, 2013, p. 546). The National Development Plan rearticulated a trickle down macro-economic framework, focused on export-led growth and foreign direct investment.

While certainly the forms of neoliberalism, conjoined in South Africa with democratization and the entrenching of a national and, in some ways, nativist bourgeoisie, have meant that the race-class project of post-apartheid South Africa has played out through deep contradictions (Hart, 2008; 2013; Von Holdt, 2019), everyday struggles and organization of working class people on the ground continues. These are pessimistic times, but in fragmentation and contradiction reside possibility.

Post-apartheid problems

Let us return to the 'NUMSA moment'. In early November of 2014 the COSATU Central Executive Committee (CEC) expelled one of its founding unions, NUMSA. The decision was taken by union officials and not at a congress of elected worker representatives, as would have been the procedure (Bezuidenhout and Tshoaedi, 2017, pp. 1-2). The CEC decision to expel its largest affiliate followed a NUMSA resolution at its own congress in 2013 not to support the African National Congress (ANC) in general elections in 2014, counter to COSATU's constitution (Pillay, 2017; Satgar and Southall, 2015; Gentle, 2015; Hunter, 2014). NUMSA members had decided that the ANC no longer represented the interests of the working class (NUMSA, 2014; Pillay, 2017). The faction within COSATU bound to Zuma and the ANC hit back (Gentle, 2015).

The fault line split over longer term disagreement, though, about the Tripartite Alliance of COSATU with the ruling ANC and South African Communist Party (SACP), which had formed in the early 1990s in the lead up to the first democratic election in 1994. These already-existing political debates were exacerbated with the Marikana Massacre in 2012 in which 34 striking mineworkers were killed by police, shot with live ammunition, while undertaking a protracted labour action around pay, followed by similar police aggression against striking farmworkers in 2012 and 2013[2]. In 2015 the General Secretary of COSATU Zwelinzima Vavi was suspended, after sexual harassment allegations were leveled against him, and then dismissed. Those within the federation critical of the Alliance understood this as a political move to remove him (Gentle, 2015).

The expulsion of NUMSA from the federation marked a watershed moment in the history of organized labour in South Africa. NUMSA went on to form a new federation, the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU) in 2017, on the principle of independent socialism, with Vavi at its helm, and with other unions, such as the Food and Allied Workers Union, which left COSATU in the wake of NUMSA's expulsion. The once dominant trade union federation COSATU lost members and legitimacy in these political battles (Bezuidenthout and Tshoaedi, 2017; Satgar and Southall, 2015; Gentle, 2015).

The left split from COSATU with the creation of SAFTU for a time held some hope of union political renewal, but sectarianism in the context of ongoing national

2. The symbolism of the mass killing, visually replicating apartheid-era patterns, sent ripples throughout the world. The National Union of Mineworkers, a core affiliate within COSATU, defended police decision-making. COSATU was slow to condemn the event, tied up as it was within anc power politics.

fractional politics has plagued these structures too (Moussouris, 2017; Pillay, 2017)[3]. These political upheavals were symptomatic of deeper contradictions surfacing in the post-apartheid period. How did we get here?

Prominent sociologist (and former trade unionist) Buhlungu (2010) had already warned COSATU of tensions between winning democratic labour rights, trade union bureaucratization and the effects of neoliberalism, in what he called a 'paradox of victory' (and see Buhlungu in Adler and Webster, 2000). Under apartheid, the black working class organized into unions at the workplace, which also confronted authoritarian rule of the apartheid state. This unified workers into a larger political struggle and made for a militant labour movement (Seidman, 1994). Gaining institutional hold in legal protections and in statutory forums in post-apartheid South Africa offered protections to some workers (see Adler and Webster, 1995), especially those most secure, but also has meant many unions lost connection to the shop floor, as struggles there became technicist and complex issues of work organization occurred at the level of centralized industry bargaining in many instances (Buhlungu 2010; Masondo, 2012).

Under apartheid, South African independent unions had championed worker control which set standards for union participation and democracy through regular meetings, decision-making structures and mandates. Much of these traditions have been undermined through the ways unions and officials in the post-apartheid period became involved in more technical restructuring decisions at higher levels; skilled union officials went to government or business; in turn, union officials have in some cases used positions for career advancement; and, some unions have been involved with direct corruption scandals, including involving union investment funds set up after 1994 (Masondo, 2012; Mabasa, 2017, p. 7-8; Gentle, 2015). With a shift from mobilization and mass action of the labour movement under apartheid, or what was called 'ungovernability', toward institutionalization, there opened a gap between union leadership and membership, in general then (Buhlungu 2010; Buhlungu and Tshoaedi, 2012). This has occurred along with the decline in trade union education of rank-and-file members, which has meant less involvement and understanding from workers with policy-making taking place through "elites" in the movement and officials (Bezuidenhout and Tshoaedi, 2017, p. 5; Hlatshwayo, 2019). Generalized poor servicing of members has also led to disaffection with unions (Buhlungu and Tshoaedi, 2012; Gentle, 2015; Dickinson, 2017; Webster and Englert, 2020).

3. In the 2018 national elections, SAFTU formed the Socialist Workers Revolutionary Party, but garnered very poor numbers and did not win even one seat in Parliament.

The optimism of the 'transition' was critiqued at the time by left academics (see the contributions to Bramble and Barchiesi, 2003). Democracy as a context of negotiated agreement and institutional leverage fairly quickly was undermined through the non-negotiation of a clearly neoliberal framework of state macrofinance, the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme (Marais, 1998; Satgar and Southall, 2015). COSATU protested GEAR on the streets and eventually made a pact to push then ANC and national president Mbeki out and bring in Zuma. The Alliance was already generating problems by the 1990s. The 'Polokwane moment', or simply 'Polokwane', named after the city in which the ANC conference overthrew Mbeki for Zuma, would not bring the relief against neoliberalism hoped for. Indeed, Zuma would entrench elite accumulation through corruption using state enterprises for more than a decade, in which state tenders were awarded to various looters in exchange for pay outs to politicians and relatives, in what has become called 'State Capture' in South Africa[4]. He was eventually replaced in party structures in late 2018 with Ramaphosa, the former deputy president, after another bruising political battle, which still plays itself out in the state and as elite interests reconfigure, austerity measures ratchet up, and in the face of deepening economic crisis (Von Holdt, 2019). COSATU's alliance politics played out on the national stage, then, as these power struggles absorbed leadership.

Changes to the economy and labour market since 1994 have also posed stark challenges to the labour movement. Some divisions, for instance between urban and rural workers have persisted (Xulu, 2012), and new divisions within the labour market have created new fissures among workers (Kenny and Webster, 1998; Kenny, 2018). First, categories of precarious labour have increased, and trade unions have been unable or unwilling to organize and represent them. As an indication of the changes to class composition of the unions, the majority of federation members shifted from the private sector to the public sector over the past twenty years and from lower skilled to higher skilled workers. They more likely to be fulltime workers, as well (Bezuidenhout and Tshoaedi, 2017). Contrasting the membership to labour market trends thus indicates the incapacities of unions to organize contract, casual, flexitime workers, as many have shown (Kenny, 2018; Barchiesi, 2011; Benjamin, 2014; Theron, 2005; Kenny and Webster, 1998; Clarke, 2004; Bezuidenhout and Fakier, 2006; Kenny and Bezuidenhout, 1999; Webster and Englert, 2020). In general unions responses to the effects of precarianization of labour, retrenchments, and restructuring were defensive and did not result in many wins for supporting workers worst hit. These changes to working class composition wrought through

4. Indeed, Vavi would apologize to the nation for backing Zuma.

decades of capital restructuring, offshoring and downsizing, then, without generative rethinking by unions have altered the political terrain in ways that many argue make old union structures obsolete.

'New' forms of working class and worker organization

A sustained critique of trade unions and models of organizing has dominated labour sociology in South Africa. There has been focus on 'new' social movements around commodification of public services, which was seen as a shift from labour politics, and befitting changing working class composition (Naidoo and Veriava, 2005; Desai, 2002; Levenson, 2017; Paret, 2018; Alexander, 2010). Indeed, Scully (2016) argues that the site of 'reproduction' is more apt ground for politics than cite of production under conditions of precarity, as declining wage income should predict that working class people battle around matters related to households. There have also been a range of studies conducted on 'new' worker organizing, including new formations outside of existing unions by precarious workers (see Desai, 2002; Kenny, 2007, 2011, 2018; Sinwell, 2015, 2016; Wilderman, 2014; Dickinson, 2017; Kodisang, 2018; Hlatshwayo, 2018; Runciman, 2019; Webster and Englert, 2020). In the wake of Marikana, scholars also returned to examining union and labour organizing. In fact, working class people continue to organize collectively both inside and outside union structures where unions have been less than responsive to worker demands. Some examples are offered below.

Hlatshwayo (2018, p. 3), for instance, argues that labour studies has focused on examining formal trade unions in South Africa but attention to other "organizational responses to precariousness" may offer signs of enduring mobilization in less visible forms. For instance, he examines community health care workers, who offer palliative care for sick residents. Community health workers are registered with the state and sometimes work for NGOs. They receive state subsidies for their work, which was initially understood to be 'voluntary', as the need for health care workers in poor communities was compounded by austerity and shortages among employed public nursing staff (Hlatshwayo, 2018, p. 5). Many health care workers are women. They organized outside of public sector health unions and often with the assistance of left NGOs to push legal cases, to establish their status as 'employees', and to improve wages and conditions (and see Kodisang, 2012).

Webster and Englert argue that there are new opportunities for organizing emerging out of precariousness. They suggest that there is 'institutional power' created from previous moments of labour organizing, specifically institutionalized in labour law. This context creates a contradiction in that established unions benefit

from their inclusion and protecting the status quo, while precarious workers fall outside of protections and substantive forms of representation. What they found is that subcontracted workers used organizing strategies with longer traditions in unions in the region in order to struggle for the incorporation of contract workers into permanent contracts with equitable wages and conditions. They assert that precarious workers are thus, "rebuilding worker organisation from below" (Webster and Englert, 2020, p. 2).

Sinwell (2015, 2016) argues that alternative structures, like workers' committees sustained the platinum mining strikes. The committees fed into newer unions, as well, that split off from the NUM. I have argued that labour politics of retail workers in greater Johannesburg has endured because of longer histories of race-class relations in employment relations, which have reproduced the site of the labour relation as linked to personhood and belonging, even as, and indeed because of how precariousness has constantly shifted the terms of 'inclusion' (Kenny, 2018). Retail workers with whom I worked for more than two decades have regularly challenged their union and formed other structures at shop floor level to contest conditions, including treatment by other workers. The ways that these politics have carried out has also, though, produced new divisions and contradictions. These are not static fields: why workers return to labour politics especially in the context of growing household vulnerability involves deeper histories that studies of examples of organizing, as 'successful' cases, often do not take into consideration because such a focus relies on demonstrating the factors accounting for success (which are offered as instrumental strategy), rather than engaging in the situated social relations explaining why and when workers act (*Idem*).

Finally, it should be noted that trade union membership remains significant in global comparison. Overall trade union membership went from 2.6 million members in 1997 to 3.26 million in 2013. COSATU grew from its formation in 1985 from over 460,000 to 1.25 million in 1991, on the brink of democracy. In 2003, it had 1.76 million members and 2.19 million in 2012 (Van der Walt, 2019, p. 24). These figures put nearly a third of the workforce covered by collective agreements (Mabasa, 2017, p. 4). Thus at COSATU congress in 2018, while its membership dropped to 1.56 million, these losses were accounted for by losses in the National Union of Mineworkers, due to splits with Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) and to the departure of NUMSA with its 338,000 members and FAWU (with 120,000 members) to form SAFTU with other unions. The Federation of Unions of South Africa (FEDUSA) claimed 700,000 members in 2017. The National Council of Trade unions (NACTU) and CONSAWU claim another nearly 300,000 members (Van der Walt, 2019, p. 24). There have been declines due to retrenchments and increasing

unemployment within the economy, but overall these membership figures suggest an enduring presence of trade unions.

Important strikes, such as in the public sector, have shown that unions can bring members out. Public sector workers struck in 2007 under Mbeki's presidency, angered by declining wages and conditions. The COSATU unions represented a majority of workers in the public sector. Soon afterwards in December 2007, Zuma was elected as ANC President, to then become state president. Unionists had moved to get him into power as noted above against Mbeki's neoliberalism. In 2010 a second large public sector strike broke out amongst teachers and hospital staff lasting for three weeks, the most person-days lost in South African history (Ceruti, 2010). This strike called on the reconfiguration within state power via the Alliance to make its wage demands. Instead, the police came out with rubber bullets and water cannons. Ceruti analyses these strikes and argues that COSATU was caught between workers, who were fed up, and the terrain of national politics being fought out within the Alliance. In short, workers (and union members) mobilized even within these tensions. The platinum belt strikes, of which Marikana was the bloody finale of one strike, and those following, show the resilience and persistence of unionized workers to contest their conditions within the current political conjuncture (Sinwell, 2016).

Indeed, even internal to COSATU, critiques have been leveled of the "crisis" of the labour movement (Mabasa, 2017, p. 1). Commonly this critique lays blame at the foot of government policy, located within tendencies within the state, as with Mbeki, or with the 'global economy'. Regardless of the immediate cause, many unionists identify contradictions thrown up in terms of global capital, labour market precarianization, increasing unemployment, declining wages, etc., and work within massive constraints to produce some gains (Jacobs, 2019; Rees, 2018). The dual role seen by COSATU activists of engaging in state developmental policy and representing workers clearly has produced tensions (see Mabasa, 2017, p. 3; and see Maserumule, forthcoming). Despite criticism of COSATU, there has been federation debate on the inadequacies of organizing segments of precarious workers. Precisely because of these changes to the balance of class forces, however, unions often turned defensive, and work to protect their numbers and clout (Mabasa, 2017).

Runciman argues that COSATU traded its 'institutional power' against working class interests, in particular citing its negotiations around labour law reform since the first democratic reform in 1995, and culminating in labour law reform in 2019, which restricts the right to strike through technical means.[5] She reports "declining"

5. The Labour Relations Act of 1995 introduced national labour rights, including the right to strike, to free association and to fair procedure and defined these in relation to a wider definition of employee, bringing

working days lost due to strikes over the past decade (Runciman, 2019, p. 148), despite fairly dramatic peaks in 2007, 2010 and 2014 with large strikes. Indeed, organized labour, as this brief history shows, has faced serious contradictions in its Alliance with the ruling party, which is in turn, embedded within South Africa's particular structural relations of racial capitalism fuelled by the entre of a (black) national bourgeoisie as global capital expanded. These are the particularities of the contradictions facing South Africa. What is significant, however, is that the critique of COSATU from working class and poor South Africans outside of its membership as well as ordinary workers within its membership has been vocal, and at times, has indeed spurned mass action, splits and new organizations. Thus, when workers have left COSATU affiliates, they have joined other unions, either through breakaways, or through new formations, what Sinwell calls in the context of the platinum sector "insurgent trade unionism" (Sinwell, 2015), where workers' committee struggles among platinum workers operated in critique of NUM, independently and later in relation to AMCU. While the outlook is pessimistic in many ways, the broader labour movement remains dynamic.

Conclusion

In the context of tightening austerity in the wake of the intertwining effects of the global economy with the Zuma 'State Capture' years, conditions in South Africa's economy are set to worsen over the short to medium term (*Amandla!* Editorial Team, 2019). Some argue that existing unions are too compromised by national and nationalist politics, with its underbelly of cronyism, to offer any real answers to the working class and poor majority in South Africa. Some see new forms of worker organizing as evidence of the nascent new movement corresponding to changes to class formation. Often these forms draw on longer South African traditions of workplace organizing, centred on labour rights, but in general shift away from industrial unions. Still others find the labour movement itself represents a minority – some even say a labour aristocracy. The combination of national politics with global capital restructuring at a moment of nationalist recentring starkly exposes the contradictions at play in South Africa over the past decade (Hart, 2013; Kenny, 2019). While fewer and fewer people are in formal employment, and the relations within jobs reproduce forms of racial abjection, inducing fraying attachments to the

new categories of workers under one regulation. Some argue that because of procedural rules required to activate a 'legal' strike, the law also has served to discipline and 'incorporate' trade unions and workers (see Adler and Webster, 1995; Adler and Webster, 2000; and see Bramble and Barchiesi, 2003).

site of labour relations as a terrain of worthwhile political struggle (Kenny, 2018; and see Barchiesi, 2011), still, as I have argued, ideas of collective subjectivity abide there. Membership in unions remains important. Unions hold public space. New worker and working class organization happens. Thus, while fragmented and contradictory, to say that 'workers' as a collective political subject are obsolete ignores the multiple grounds on which working class people continue to struggle.

These are likely to come from multiple directions. Efforts which engage issues of colonial despotism and dispossession are likely to expand (see Nkosi, 2018; Hart, 2013; Bennie, 2019). This paper suggests that the broader landscape of the so-called 'new' forms of worker organization combined with existing trade union persistence presents a combined and complex terrain, which while sobering, also suggests that rendering workers' politics obsolete is perhaps premature. In so much as workers' struggles continue to be posed as access to a site of equality and relationality within a long history of racial abjection, then workers' struggles continue to draw on a politics of liberation. In so far as new forms of vitriolic neoliberal capitalism operate through state power, the conditions of survival will create new lines of division and repeat the impossibility of equality through 'work'. The very nature of those actions will likely be divided.

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Abstract

The South African labour movement: A fragmented and shifting terrain

This paper reviews the state of the South African labour movement. It discusses trade unions within the context of national political dynamics, including the Tripartite Alliance and neoliberalism, as well as growing precarianization of work within South Africa. It examines splits within the major federation and explores debates around union renewal and new worker organizations. It argues that the political terrain is fragmented and shifting, but workers' collective labour politics abides.

Keywords: Labour movement; South Africa; cosatu; New forms of organization.

Resumo

O movimento sindical sul-africano: um terreno fragmentado e instável

Este artigo analisa o estado do movimento sindical sul-africano. Discute os sindicatos no contexto da dinâmica política nacional, incluindo a Aliança Tripartite e o neoliberalismo, bem como a crescente pré-arianização do trabalho na África do Sul. Ele examina as divisões dentro da grande federação e explora os debates em torno da renovação sindical e das novas organizações de trabalhadores. Argumenta-se que o terreno político é fragmentado e instável, mas a política coletiva de trabalho dos trabalhadores permanece.

Palavras-chave: Movimento sindical; África do Sul; cosatu; Novas formas de organização.

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